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THE ROLES THE CURE REPLACES: A LOOK INTO SOCIAL
STRUCTURE WITH THE INVENTION OF THE CURE FROM
THE POSTMORTAL

Elizabeth Wang

There is a myriad of models meant to explain what it means to be human.

The models outline functions, processes, and theories all created to empirically understand the human experience. These ways of interpreting the inner-workings of the human brain provide key insights into how we explain things in our daily lives. Perhaps one of the most important models is the process of taking on a societal role. As we age, we are placed into different situations that force us to adjust, often requiring us to step into certain roles. According to leading sociologist Richard Schaefer, a social role is “a set of expectations for people who occupy a given social position or status” (418). In *The Postmortal* by Drew Magary, many characters choose to live a stagnant life. They choose not to take on certain roles that come with the normal aging process. As humans we value time, and are often in a rush to accomplish certain things. If given unlimited time through the development of a scientific cure for aging, as is the case in *The Postmortal*, people, frozen at whatever age they are in when they took the cure, choose not to take on certain roles. They thereby fundamentally alter the human timeline of a life. While the cure is only supposed to make someone stay a certain age, it also alters the mind into stagnation due to fact many are unwilling to take on developmental roles. Drew Magary’s *The Postmortal* causes the reader to reflect on the roles we fulfill and the consequences of potentially not assuming them.

The process of assuming many roles is often complex, consisting of several sequential steps, but the first of any is the process of anticipatory socialization. Anticipatory socialization is the progression of changing attitudes and behaviors in order to prepare to take on a new role. The attitude of the person becomes better suited to what they believe a person in the role should act. For example, in *The Postmortal* when the protagonist John gets ready to take the cure at the age of 27, which is still illegal at the time, he believes that he must be secretive. He plays into the hoax before getting the cure by saying “I was briefly disappointed that [the doctor] stopped referring to the cure as ‘the toaster.’ I really wanted to see how long we could keep it

up” (7). After this point, John is technically committing a criminal act; he is getting an illicit drug that alters his life, so, because he does not want to get caught, his brain psychologically causes him to act secretive about it. This is how he perceives those with the cure act; they must be secretive in order to not go to jail. John keeps referring to the cure as a “toaster” which allows him to distance himself from his illegal activity. Even if he is calling the cure a toaster, it does not change his actions. It is only a strategy to help justify that he’s made the right choice. He is anticipating the role he must take once he receives the cure, by prematurely acting this way.

We are unable to know how John was before the possibility of getting the cure, but even afterwards he must keep it a secret from most people. He adjusts his attitude in order to fit into his role of becoming a postmortal. He used the sociological idea of anticipatory socialization in order to fulfill his role. Interestingly, getting the cure requires people to step into an ambiguous role that is undefined and ultimately hard to fulfill because there are no guidelines to how a postmortal should act. Once it is legalized, it became a normal thing. To draw a contemporary parallel, the idea of the cure is similar to marijuana legalization. People have been criminalized for possession of something that is quite simply just an overpriced plant.

Similarly, the roles relating to marriage are warped with the development of the cure for aging: people no longer feel the need to spend the rest of their life with someone else. Marriage is a social institution, which Richard Schaefer defines as, “an organized pattern of beliefs and behavior centered on basic social needs” (418). Marriage fulfills several necessary human needs; however, these tasks are no longer required with the invention of the cure. Marriage provides reassurance when people age, but now people no longer need someone forever. With the cure, forever is not only 30 or 40 years with someone, it is much longer. To adjust to this, lawyers create cycle marriages, which prevent people from truly committing to the role of a married man or woman since a marriage expires after a certain preset number of years. John wants neither a cycle marriage nor he does not want to commit his whole life to one person. He states:

People got married before because they knew, deep down, that there would come a time in their lives when they would become too old, too ugly, and too infirm to have anyone care about them except their spouse. You needed someone to change your bedpan and help tie your shoes and all that. That’s all gone now Sonia. All that fear is gone. And whatever urge there is for people to find a lifetime companion... I don’t have that anymore. (79)

With the invention of the cure, people stay young and able-bodied for the rest of their lives. They no longer need the love and companionship that marriage guarantees an unwilling side effect of the cure. Marriage comes with

preconceived notions that are fulfilled by the cure, which causes many people with to cure to not marry. People traditionally marry for love, but marriage is also full of unspoken assumptions such as: companionship, financial security, and personal need. In old age, people have marriage to fall back to, but when the concept of aging is stopped, people no longer need these reassurances. They are able to support themselves throughout their lives, working and also traveling. All of the things John perceives he gets out of marriage can be satisfied a by his young age. Marriage, in many ways, is a method of growth, with the cure people no longer fulfill this role and thus do not grow from this experience.

With the ability to not age, some people may feel psychologically stuck in that given age. Age alters someone's perception of how they should act. Much of our life is based on how other people our age act. Our brain wires itself to behave according to the age our body is, the best example of this can be seen in Julia: a cure-aged eighteen year old who is actually forty-two. Although she is older, she feels a psychological need to act eighteen. She states, "Still, I know all that stuff. But half the time I feel compelled to act like this stupid little girl.' 'It's like your body is dictating to your brain what role you should play'" (272). Her eighteen-year-old body creates a sociological drive to not age her mind. This stops critical thinking and all aging of the brain. One of the biggest reasons people advocated for the cure was to preserve the great minds. But the ability of the body not to age causes the mind not to age. People of great minds would no longer grow and could possibly not be able to make great scientific breakthroughs without the aging process. The mind and body are in a negative feedback loop with one another and this stagnate intellectual growth.

With living forever, the idea of leaving a legacy is erased. Some of the most influential historical people have left great legacies that people look to match. With the invention of the cure, great musicians, sports players, and other entertainers are living forever. It sets new standards of greatness that people new entertainers cannot match. People do this for a lifetime with the constant need to one up themselves. It redefines what we traditionally consider excellence. Magary writes about fictional baseball player Ryan Wexler:

Naturally, Ryan Wexler will break the record, but we all know it isn't because he is a better player than his predecessors. It's not a tragedy. It's just the cure forcing us to redefine the notion of excellence. This isn't just a baseball thing. This is an issue across the entire culture now. How can you be a success or have a legacy if your career-nay, your entire life- has no definitive story arc? (110)

The cure completely erases the ability to have a cure. If someone does die, then all of his or her records are able to be surpassed. Greatness is no longer how much skill someone has, it is just how much time the person

has to do that skill. Greatness and ability are redefined and it becomes almost impossible to be remembered for what someone has accomplished. People are easily forgotten and it devalues accomplishments and the value of a human life. The greatest players are now thrown to the side because there are so many great players. Once someone has died then they are easily replaced, greatness is constantly redefined with the next person becoming better than his predecessor. This new idea can force others to not grow into the people they are meant to be, stopping personal growth and not leaving a role to fill.

Although the cure may allow the body to live forever, it stops the mind from intellectually growing and alters the human experience. In many ways, *The Postmortal* follows the sociological impact roles play on certain people. It redefines the ideas of marriage, and legacies and stops growth. It is important that as a society we are ever-changing and evolving to the situations faced, role-taking is an important aspect of this. Roles are necessary because with each changing role, there is personal growth improving civilization. We must ensure that people do follow the necessary roles to grow as a people, making sure that something like the cure is never given to society.

Works Cited

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